

THEFT AT THE COOP

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The Scene of the Crime: Not in the Shopping Area—It's the Second Floor

By Juliet Kleber

CULTURE OF TRUST

On the Coop shopping floor, it is not uncommon to see a member leave their cart and hurry to another (perhaps especially crowded) aisle to grab an item or two, unencumbered by their groceries and their purse or backpack, which then sit unguarded in the unattended cart.

Among members, it seems, there is a feeling of trust in fellow member-owners that contributes to lack of vigilance around the security of their personal belongings. Anya Shiferson, a Coop member since 2015 and a temporary staff member during the pandemic, described feeling “pretty blasé about leaving my purse on my cart while I shop and roam around.” During the time she worked at the Coop, she said, she never wor-

ried about theft of personal belongings and never heard of it happening. “I used to leave my phone to charge at the entrance all the time. It always felt very trusting and relaxed, which is why I loved working in the office even pre-pandemic,” Shiferson said.

Most of the time that trust is not misplaced, but a recent spate of thefts has Coop leadership urging members and staff alike to be more cautious with their valuables. According to Coop founder, General Manager and Treasurer Joe Holtz, “Maybe ninety percent of the time, it’s fine. But I don’t think people would be leaving valuables in their carts in their neighborhood Key Foods.” And though theft from carts is uncommon, on two occasions this summer an individual has succeeded in pilfering wallets and credit cards from places where staff and members leave their things as they go about their work.

While lockers are provided by the front entrance, members working shifts in receiving or in the basement—like stocking, lifting, and produce or cheese processing—have been known to leave bags and other personal items on hooks that are meant for coats and jackets. Even those member-workers who are more wary often leave coats and bags on hooks and keep valuables like wallets and cellphones on their person rather than using the lockers. Some simply forget they’re there. One such member, Priscilla Posada, keeps her belongings close by when she’s working checkout shifts. “I guess I forget,” said Posada, who joined the Coop in 2019. “They’re not as visible—I can see the piles of jackets and bags by the stairs but the lockers look empty and feel like they’re maybe not for our use.” Others just forgo the lockers because it would be an additional stop before reporting to their shifts. For those who do leave their wallets and such in unguarded places, it is likely due to that same sense of security and trust that might make us easy targets for theft.



THE INCIDENTS

In the summer of 2022, there have been two reported occasions in which multiple wallets or credit cards were stolen. According to email reports, both incidents were discovered by victims, who realized after the fact that their belongings were taken and reported the missing items to their supervisors. Upon receiving those reports, the Coop's closed-circuit surveillance system was consulted and the video footage was found to have caught both thefts taking place. While Holtz declined to put the *Lincolnton Gazette* in contact with the theft victims for interviews, they did provide a detailed account of the events as recorded by the store's cameras.

The first incident took place on June 21, a Tuesday, just before 7 p.m. The CCTV footage shows an individual (not believed to be a Coop member) entering through the front doors wearing a face mask, waving to the member working at the entrance desk, and proceeding directly to the second floor without entering the shopping area. From there, the individual looked into the conference room, then proceeded through the south office and into the staff room. This room contains a microwave and refrigerator for Coop employees to prepare meals and lockers to store their belongings. Once

inside the staff room, the interloper was filmed testing lockers to find some that had been left unlocked and ultimately taking two wallets, which belonged to staff. He then proceeded to the main staircase and exited the Coop.

The second incident took place nearly a month later, on Sunday, July 24, also around 7 p.m. Surveillance video shows someone approaching the Coop from the direction of 6th Avenue and entering in the same manner as before, passing the entrance desk to the second floor. Upon discovering that the staff room was occupied, the individual returned to the first floor, spoke briefly with the entrance worker at the desk and was allowed to proceed the shopping floor without swiping in. From there, they went directly to the stairwell that leads to the basement and began searching through bags that members had left. The individual then left the Coop from that stairwell. Two members who had stored their belongings on or around the hooks reported missing items after their shift, and the closed circuit camera footage was reviewed, revealing the events related above.



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SCHULMAN

A HISTORY OF THEFT AT THE COOP

Like any retailer, the Coop experiences some product loss, but theft of personal belongings is uncommon. Membership Coordinator Mike Voytko is the staff person responsible for reviewing the Coop's CCTV footage, and while he gets "occasional requests" to review CCTV footage "from someone who thinks their wallet was stolen out of a shopping cart, or they left a purse or a bag in their cart and they come back and find that cash has been taken," he considers those incidents rare.

Cases like this summer's thefts, involving a person repeatedly targeting personal belongings, are not unprecedented but are rare enough to be memorable. Two particular cases stand out in the collective memory of those interviewed by the *Gazette*.

In the late 90s or early aughts, a non-member repeatedly stole items from the shopping floor, first stealing products from the Coop and eventually graduating to theft of wallets and purses from shopping carts. According to Holtz, who recounted this history in an interview, these thefts were frequent enough to become "an economic problem for the Coop." Eventually, that person was arrested in the store when a squad leader witnessed a theft taking place, called the police and managed to stall the person until they arrived.

Another string of thefts that occurred in the early aughts more closely resembles the events of this summer. The perpetrator in those cases was a minor (also a non-member) who repeatedly entered the Coop to steal personal belongings from staff areas upstairs. "That person was adept at coming into the offices—not the shopping floor—and coming in at times when the offices were sparsely populated and taking personal things from desktops and desks."

Holtz related one remarkable incident from that series of events: "It was a Sunday evening, and I received a phone call from a worker who was locking up and gave their keys to someone outside the Coop." When they realized their mistake, the worker alerted Holtz, who hurried over to the Coop immediately, and quickly recognized the

same minor, “I walked up to the kid—it was the same kid that we’d already chased out of the building other times—and I said ‘give me the keys’ and he did.” Holtz believes that the teen had convinced the Coop worker to hand over the keys with the intention of breaking into the store once everyone had gone. “This kid was adept at telling adults stories to get what they want,” Holtz said, “they got this adult to hand over the keys based on a story.” He was reminded of this incident when reviewing the report of the July theft, “in this case, they told the entrance worker a story that was effective”—enough to get onto the shopping floor without scanning in.

The thief in the early-aughts eventually stopped returning for unknown reasons, but Holtz believes that, based on the apparent age of the individual in the CCTV footage, it could be the same person, now an adult. “Judging from the video, I feel like there’s a possibility that this is the same person.” He was struck by other similarities between the two cases—the targeting of the upstairs offices rather than the shopping floor, the familiarity with the layout of the building, the ability to talk their way into the Coop and “the fact that this person came here with such comfort makes me feel like the person remembers being comfortable here as a youth.” Still, Holtz is not entirely certain, “I haven’t seen a photo of this new person that can definitely tell me it’s the same person, but if I got to see this person in person, I believe I’d be able to tell... but hopefully I’ll never get a chance to see this person because he’ll never come back.”



WHAT'S NEXT?

Though caught on camera, there are no plans to release images or descriptions of the person responsible for the thefts. Holtz makes a compelling argument for withholding such details based on past incidents: members eager to apprehend a thief have misidentified and falsely accused other shoppers, and avoiding that kind of profiling is paramount. “One time we had a photo of that guy that was arrested here,” he explains, “and there were a set of members that were roughly that person’s look and height, and [other members] would look at the photo and say ‘this must be the person’ and they were wrong... the pain of that happening in our Coop is just not acceptable.”

For now, the General Coordinators are focusing on preventative measures, specifically the installation of locks on several doors to prevent access to staff spaces by potential bad actors. Three doors in particular are being discussed as possible barrier points—the south office, the copy room, and the receiving room. These doors would be locked during certain times of day, possibly employing an electronic keypad so that those who work in those areas could move around with relative ease. Still, even those

prevention methods present their own set of challenges, balancing the needs for freedom of movement, convenience, and security. Certain doors, like the one leading to the staff room that was the site of the theft, must remain unlocked for safety reasons as points of egress from the building. And though the person accessed the Coop by bypassing the entrance desk and proceeding upstairs, there are also no plans to restrict access to that area for numerous logistical reasons. “We have the need for openness in the Coop,” said Holtz, “for members to be able walk freely in the area before the desk and go up to the second floor to return their seltzer bottles, to see someone upstairs. That openness is valuable.”

At present, it has been over a month without another theft of that nature, so hopefully any security changes will remain untested for the foreseeable future. Still, Coop management urges members and staff alike to stay aware. Signage warning members not to leave their valuables has been posted in the stairwell where the July thefts took place and some workers have recalled being reminded of the same by their supervisors at the start of their shifts.

“The Coop is a special place for all of us,” said Coordinator Mike Voytko. “It’s like a second home to many, certainly among the staff, and it can be easy to let our guard down.” But the message from Coop leadership is a simple one: Be mindful of your valuables and do not leave them unsecured.

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